

## **Elected Mayor's Report- July 2020**

*The last few months have been some of the most difficult our town has faced in its history. COVID-19 has presented an unprecedented challenge but I am very proud of the way our council and community has responded. Our staff have reacted phenomenally well, providing support to those most in need and adapting to new roles and responsibilities. I would also like to thank all councillors who have been working across party lines during this period for the benefit of our town.*

*Watford has seen a higher death rate from COVID-19 than some other parts of the country and my heart goes out to everyone in our town who has lost a loved one too soon to this terrible virus. I would also like to pay tribute to the amazing staff at Watford General Hospital and local care homes who have been going to work every day to care for us.*

*We have seen what has happened recently in Leicester and we know that although transmission of the virus has greatly reduced in Watford, we must all continue to stay safe and consider others.*

*We also saw the Black Lives Matter movement come to Watford in light of the appalling murder of George Floyd. Watford is a tolerant town where many different communities live side-by-side. We must always challenge racism and injustice where we find it.*

*Due to these events, my report will take a different format than normal but will still I hope cover the work we have undertaken as a council and as a town during the last few months.*

### **COVID-19 Response**

#### **Supporting the most vulnerable**

We have responded generously to support the most vulnerable in our town. We quickly reacted to move all rough sleepers in our town into accommodation at One YMCA and the Travelodge, where they received specialist support. This was very complex work and I would like to thank our fantastic housing team, One YMCA and New Hope for making this possible. I'd also like to thank Cllr Steve Johnson for his work on this as Housing Portfolio-holder. We have continued this support by working with One YMCA to move a number of rough sleepers in to permanent accommodation at Charter House, where support will be offered to transform the lives of former rough sleepers.

We have also been working closely with some incredible voluntary groups in the town to help make sure food parcels and other support get to those who have been isolated at

home. Working with W3RT, we have helped mobilise an incredible army of 1,400 volunteers who have been busy delivering food packages, collecting prescriptions and keeping people company over the phone who might be isolated. I would like to pay tribute to all the groups involved in this effort, including One Vision, SEWA Day, Small Acts of Kindness, Random Café, Go Kula, the Salvation Army, the Watford Gurdwara, Watford Chamber of Commerce and many others.

### **Supporting our local businesses**

This has been an incredibly challenging period for businesses in our town. We have been working hard to ensure they have the right support and advice available to them. This has included the delivery of over £15 million worth of grant support to 1,100 local businesses. Our Revenue and Benefits team worked around the clock to deliver this as quickly as possible to eligible local businesses.

We have also been working hard with local businesses to prepare them for reopening safely and making sure they had access to most up to date advice and support. Our Environmental Health team have personally visited hundreds businesses in our town throughout this period to provide with them with tailored advice about social distancing, support for their staff and make sure they had expert advice from Public Health England.

As part of this work, we have been making changes to the town centre to help manage crowds and make sure people are safe when coming into our high street. This has included introducing a new one way system in the town centre, marshals helping to direct people through the town and working with Hertfordshire County Council to close part of the High Street to vehicle traffic. This helps social distancing and keep people safe. It is so important that we all support our local businesses with our custom - they need us now more than ever.

Finally, I would like to thank all our local businesses who have been doing so much for our community during this difficult time. Through working with the Watford Chamber of Commerce, they have provided thousands of food donations to support our hospital staff and vulnerable people in Watford.

### **Supporting our charities**

Our local charities and community groups have been doing a phenomenal job during this crisis to support our town. Whether that be by delivering emergency food parcels, supporting victims of domestic abuse, helping disadvantaged children, providing virtual services for isolated adults with disabilities or giving end of life care, they have been incredible.

However, this has also been an incredibly tough time financially for many of our local charities who have been left without their normal income streams and some have been worried that without emergency support they could be in a very serious situation.

That is why we gave access to our Mayor's Small Grant funds as well as councillor's neighbourhood locality budgets early. We also worked with W3RT to launch a new COVID-19 Appeal. Thanks to generous donations from individuals, local businesses and councillors, this raised over £150,000 in just a few weeks.

This has provided lifeline funding to some of our local charities when they have needed it the most.

### **Protecting our health**

We have been working hard trying to keep people in our town safe from COVID-19 but it is heart-breaking that a number of families in our town have lost loved ones to this virus. I am calling for a full public inquiry into care home deaths in Hertfordshire to understand how this has happened and so we can learn lessons from it so it can never happen again.

I am pleased that our Environmental Health were able to ring round our amazing staff in our local care homes to provide them with additional Personal Protective Equipment and make sure the Public Health team in Hertfordshire were aware of issues in our care homes.

We have been in close discussions with Hertfordshire County Council to support their Local Outbreak Management plans and what work we would undertake if these actions were necessary. We are monitoring the data from Public Health England closely and are pleased to see a large reduction in COVID-19 cases and deaths in the town.

### **Financial Impact**

Responding to COVID-19 has undoubtedly had an impact on our finances, like many councils across the country. We have seen an increase in our expenditure as we work hard to protect our community but also seen a drop in our income from our leisure centres, our car parks, our business rates and other income generation opportunities.

Due to careful planning over a number of years Watford is in a much stronger position than many other councils, some of whom are considering issuing Section 114 notices. However, it is clear we need greater funding from central government if we are to continue investment in our town and not face difficult decisions in relation to our spending.

## **Delivering my Manifesto and Working for the Town**

### **Black Lives Matter Movement**

I was horrified to see the shocking murder of George Floyd and I know that this, and events like it, have caused pain to so many people.

It is important we always stand up and challenge every form of discrimination, racism and injustice. I am proud to be Mayor of a diverse town, where people from many different backgrounds care for one another and share in each other's successes and struggles. This is a source of strength for our town.

There are still many injustices to overcome. It is deeply worrying that people from certain backgrounds have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

I have started regularly meetings with our Afro Caribbean community to listen and understand their concerns and lit our Town Hall in purple in solidarity with their movements.

I am keen that we are judged by our actions however, not just by our words and gestures. I am also keen that we work with everyone across the community to make sure we continue to be a town for everyone.

### **Sustainable Transport**

Despite the challenges of COVID-19, I am pleased we have been able to continue to deliver the improvements to our town that I promised when I was elected in 2018.

Our Beryl Bike scheme launched in March and has been a huge success. 37,000 journeys have been made across the town and during lockdown has offered local residents a safe way to get around our town that keeps them fit and follows the government's guidance on avoiding public transport use if possible. 19,000 local residents have so far used the scheme.

I am particularly pleased that we have been able to offer free journeys to all NHS workers in the town. 711 free rides have been made by 160 Watford NHS staff over this period. I am also pleased that our docking station at Watford General Hospital has been very well used and we have been able to offer a new affordable way for our local hospital staff to get to and from work.

Arriva Click launched in the town on 1<sup>st</sup> July. This offers people in our town a new and greener way to get around Watford. This will help tackle congestion and make our air cleaner. To keep people safe from COVID-19, we have limited each bus to 4 passengers to ensure social distancing. Anyone using the buses will also be required to wear a face covering, in line with current government advice.

I am so pleased to have offered these fantastic new ways of getting around our town. As Watford grows, more and more people are concerned about congestion on our roads and these initiatives provide new green ways to get about Watford. I am pleased to have delivered on key promises I made to people in our town when I was elected.

### **Watford Junction**

Work has started on one the first of a series of improvement projects aimed at bringing Watford Junction into the 21st century. The initial project aims to enhance the forecourt area outside the station building and create an improved 'gateway' to the town centre.

This project is the start of a long awaited and ambitious plan to transform Watford Junction, with works due to start on radical improvements to the concourse area of the station in spring 2021. This is being led by Network Rail and developer Halkin. Improvements to the current long stay and short stay car park situation are also being looked at.

8 million people a year travel through Watford Junction station, making it the top 1% busiest stations in the country. I am really excited to kick-start these works to bring our station into the 21st century. This will make the station forecourt a more welcoming and interesting place and will be a much better first impression for people coming to our town.

### **St Albans Road Improvements**

I'm really pleased to see work starting on improving St Albans Road, after an extensive consultation with businesses and residents about what they would like to see changed in the area.

Improvements will include replacing the pavements to remove the current patchwork of paving materials and to remedy the current poor surface water drainage. The removal of redundant street furniture, guard-railing and unnecessary signage will reduce street clutter and the over provision and poor sighting of traffic signs. New strategically placed street furniture will improve the surroundings whilst helping to stop illegal on-pavement parking.

St Albans Road is key route into and out of our town centre. It is used by thousands of people every day and is an important place for businesses, leisure and socialising. One of my

key manifesto commitments was to improve this area and I am pleased we are delivering on this commitment. We must make sure that all of our town can benefit from investment and schemes like these are really important making Watford a better place.

I would also like to praise Cllr Dawn Allen Williamson and Cllr Ian Stotesbury for their work on this.

### **Challenging Government Planning Rules**

The government has announced that it is banning windowless flats. This is after 15 flats in Wellstones were approved by a government planning inspector, 7 of which were windowless and half the size of the government's minimum size for a living space. Watford Borough Council opposed this development but it was allowed to go ahead by a government inspector. Watford's Liberal Democrat team have been leading a campaigning for these rules to change and the problem was highlighted by Baroness Thornhill and Baroness Brinton in the House of Lords.

However, these new regulations also mean that developers can now build upwards when converting offices into flats without seeking planning permission. These could mean that high rise development could be built in Watford without the developer needing any planning permission.

I am pleased that the government have listened to us and have banned windowless flats. It is a scandal that anyone could approve accommodation that does not even have a window. These tiny rooms were simply not fit for human habitation.

However, I am worried about these new rights for developers to build upwards in our town without permission, which will take more powers away from councils and hand them to developers. The government has also failed to say anything about the size of the rooms which people could be living in.

We all know the consequences of families living in overcrowded and cramped accommodation. I want everyone in our town to have the right to live in a decent, good quality home and it simply is not good enough that we still do not have the powers to reject housing that is not fit for human habitation.

### **Oxhey Activity Park**

Work is progressing well on plans to create the new Oxhey Activity Park, with work now in a very advanced stage. This includes the creation of a new skate park, facilities for cyclists, a family friendly café and new play areas for children. This works are due to be completed in

the autumn. These should provide fantastic new facilities for people of all ages in our town to enjoy.

I am pleased that despite the challenges that COVID-19 has brought we are still able to deliver new fantastic facilities for our parks and green spaces.

### **Garston Park Improvements**

Improvement works are continuing at Garston Park, which will hopefully see it join our 12 Green Flag Parks and Open Spaces, the highest in Hertfordshire. Improvements to Garston Park include new children's play areas, a new small skate park, new paved walkways, a wildflower meadow and brand new tree planting. The plans were created with the help of the Friends of Garston Park and with the feedback from local residents.